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# **Understanding the Transnational Higher Education Landscape: shifting positionality and the complexities of partnership**

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## **Abstract**

This article presents a comprehensive review of research on transnational higher education published between 2006 and 2014. It aims to provide an overview of a highly complex field that is both nascent and shifting, with research developing unevenly and concentrated in particular areas. This overview will enable academics working in transnational higher education to place their practice in the wider context of socio-political and cultural discourses. The review adopts the concept of positionality, which defines individuals and/or groups not in terms of fixed identities but by their shifting location within networks of relationships as a means of understanding the changing landscape.

**Keywords:** Transnational higher education, positionality, international partnership, intercultural partnership

## **Introduction**

A review of the U.K. literature on the internationalisation of higher education (Caruana and Spurling 2007) posed the question 'The future shape of institutional internationalisation – Transnational higher education?' Statistics published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) suggest that since that time, at least in terms of absolute growth in student numbers, TNHE has expanded exponentially. In the academic year 2007-2008 there were 196,670 students studying U.K. programmes in their home countries. Within the five year period to 2012-13, the total number of TNHE students had increased to 598,485 (almost a three-fold rise). However, disaggregating the statistics demonstrates the overwhelming significance of international partnership within the field of TNHE. Whilst the number of distance learners had risen slightly to 123,635 and enrolments at branch campuses had more than doubled to 17,135, the number of students studying UK degrees delivered overseas by partner organisations had increased more than ten-fold to 343,320 (HESA).

Transnational education is often discussed as a form of international education, which itself derives from the notions of international mobility and education as a tradable service. Put simply international education involves either the students moving to the education programmes (international student recruitment) or the programmes moving to the students (transnational education). However, the 2007 review suggested that a key problem in understanding transnational higher education is terminology, since a variety of terms are often used inconsistently to describe a complex range of activities.

The Global Alliance on Transnational Education defines transnational education as follows: 'Any teaching or learning activity in which the students are in a different country (the host country) to that in which the institution providing the education is based (the home country). This situation requires that national boundaries be crossed by information about the education, and by the staff and/or educational materials (whether the information and the education and the

materials travel by mail, computer network, radio or television broadcast or other means)' (GATE 2000: 1, cited in Heffernan and Poole 2005).

HESA similarly defines transnational activity in terms of programmes of study, programmes originating in a UK HEI but delivered by an institution in another country, programmes delivered from the UK by distance learning and programmes conducted at a foreign branch campus of a UK institution. This definition would seem to encompass a variety of partnership arrangements between 'home' and 'host' institutions or 'less committed strategies' at one end of the scale and direct investment in the form of establishing a branch campus overseas at the other, this strategy involving greatest commitment to the host country (Garrett 2004; Garrett and Verbik, 2004; Howe and Martin 1998, cited in Caruana and Spurling 2007).

The 2007 review for the Higher Education Academy suggested some of the complexity and tensions concerning TNHE at that time. These included tensions between the European Bologna process and U.K. policy objectives; issues around the concept of 'quality higher education', which is culturally and socially constructed and politically framed and inadequate quality assurance (QA) mechanisms, which fail to consider the cumulative operation and aggregated local impact of the presence and operation of U.K. transnational providers in host countries. In addition to this, the existing literature in 2007 suggested there was an imbalance between motivations of income generation and motivations of mutual understanding to address political, cultural, academic and development aid goals. Significantly, the 2007 review also suggested that transnational higher education was failing to live up to the ideals of critical pedagogy, disinterested research and personal and cultural development (Caruana and Spurling 2007).

It is difficult to estimate the scale of the global market in TNHE since many countries do not record the overseas activities of their universities. However, the three-fold increase in activity on the part of UK universities provides a useful proxy for global trends. The UK is a key player in transnational higher education reported to have more international students studying for UK degrees located outside the UK rather than inside (British Council 2013). However, this current article reviews the literature on TNHE generated beyond the UK. It therefore reflects the fundamental nature of TNHE which rather than being the outcome of unilateral actions taking place within borders is shaped by a myriad of horizontal and vertical acts of border-crossing in regional, national, international and intercultural policy, governance and practice contexts.

The recent unprecedented growth of TNHE has taken place within multiple socio-cultural, political and economic contexts and has been negotiated within a complex, layered environment of power structures, identities and subjectivities which involve interaction within and between supra-national, national, regional, institutional and individual levels of structure and agency (Djerasimovic 2014). The concept of positionality in global society has relevance since it captures the shifting asymmetrical ways in which the futures of individuals and/or groups in one geographical location are determined by their interdependencies with other individuals and/or groups in other locations. Positionality therefore enables us to understand TNHE as a phenomenon which reflects the forces of globalisation and their influence on social space and time (Montgomery, 2014).

Many neo-liberal globalisation theorists use phrases such as the 'shrinking world', 'time-space compression' and 'time-space convergence' to argue that spatial difference has been eliminated in favour of a universal narrative of change where space and location is unimportant since

globalisation equalises development possibilities everywhere. In contrast, it is argued here that while globalisation increases connectivity it also shifts positionality between hitherto separate societies. TNHE brings 'home' and 'host', 'sender' and 'receiver' states, institutions and their staff and students into intercultural partnership relationships which, rather than being static, are subject to a continuous process of change which includes the dimensions of power, ascendancy, hegemony, subjugation and status in relation to where one 'position' stands relative to 'the other'. (Sheppard, 2002; 2006)

Positionality is not only a matter of territorial structures, locations or places but can be ascribed to agents operating at scales from the body up to the world region. Existing geographical differences in positionality may be compounded by the actions of positionally advantaged agents, possibly developed Western 'senders' who control networks of relationships that simultaneously position 'others', possibly less developed, Eastern, 'receivers', in a present and potentially future state of compliance or dependence. The concept of transactional positionality acknowledges that as individuals we all occupy positions in a range of categories of difference and location such as ethnicity, racialisation and social class and that difference and inequality are processes, rather than possessive characteristics of individuals. Transactional positionality therefore enables us to think of difference and inequality as non-essentialist, dynamic and changeable, of identities as always relational to our location situationally and in relation to social boundaries and hierarchies. Positionalities are thus tied in complex ways to situations, meanings and the interplay of our social locations. In the context of TNHE transactional positionality acknowledges that living in the same place does not necessarily imply similar positionality and challenges simplistic notions of a 'core' of 'sending' partners setting the agenda for a marginalised 'periphery' of 'receivers' of TNHE. Proximity in geographical space may be symmetrical but positionality portrays a relationship between different agents in different places, operating at different scales that are complex, fluid and shifting over time (Anthias, 2006; Sheppard, 2002; Sheppard, 2006; Montgomery, 2014).

Within the framework of positionality this review has two central aims. The first aim is to try to negotiate and make sense of the complex global terrain of TNHE in order to enable academics and other colleagues who are involved in transnational HE partnerships and collaborations, and who are designing and delivering programmes, and supporting learning, to position themselves and their practice within wider discourses. Secondly, the review aims to specifically explore the trends in 'home' and 'host', 'sender' and 'receiver' positionality in relation to TNHE in order to understand how the forces of globalisation, international mobilities and greater interdependence are influencing developments. These forces may be challenging post-colonial structures of dependence and compliance or alternatively, perpetuating them through a process whereby advantaged agents who control existing networks of relationships forge alliances with local elites. (Sheppard, 2006). Naidoo (2008) in *'Building sustainable higher education'*, (a collection of articles from scholars based in South Africa, Latin America, India and China), shows how higher education is:

...expected to promote economically-productive knowledge: advanced skills will attract investment leading to economic growth which will benefit all sectors of society. However, the obstacles to many developing countries are alarming. Historical conditions such as colonial and post-colonial origins of the university system, structural adjustment policies and 'brain drain' have all had negative impacts.' (Naidoo, 2008 online at <http://www.eldis.org/id21ext/publications/insights-ed07.pdf> p1)

A central concern of this article is whether globalisation and attendant shifts in positionality are reducing the impact of these obstacles via transnational higher education.

## Methodology

This article is based on a comprehensive literature review which aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the interrelationship of the multiple social, cultural and political contexts and structures within which transnational higher education is playing out, in order to establish a view of the complex teaching and learning context of TNHE. Through the analysis and synthesis of research carried out in the field over the last eight years (since 2006) consistently emerging issues, central debates, concerns and challenges are identified.

The review is selective in providing a snapshot, within a contained period of time, of readily accessible articles published in journals. Only limited consideration is given to the wider 'grey' literature. The literature search did not encompass published books or reports compiled by non-academic organisations (there is a great deal of this) but was constituted from a purposive sample relating to transnational higher education. The review was approached through an extensive electronic search using higher education research platforms in the main. 'HEDBIB', the International Association of Universities' (IAU) International Bibliographical Database on HE enabled access to some 38,000 records. *Research into Higher Education abstracts* published by the Society for Research into Higher Education was also central in providing ease of access to articles published in journals focusing on a wide range of areas in HE. However, other journals not necessarily included in SRHE abstracts and/or 'HEDBIB' but known for their focus on the international and intercultural dimensions of higher education were also searched. These include for example, the *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *COMPARE: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* and *Comparative Education*. Cognisant of the fact that much of the work produced by non-Western authors may be published in journals focused on education within their own region journals such as the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Education* and the *International Journal of Chinese Education* were also trawled for relevant pieces.

Criteria for inclusion related to the framework of TNHE outlined in the introduction to this article, but criteria were refined as the literature search progressed. For example, material related to distance learning was initially included in the selection framework but was ultimately rejected since it is a field of inquiry which is generating a huge amount of literature much of which extends beyond the discrete boundaries of TNHE. Once material was identified the review worked initially with titles and abstracts where it was felt that key findings and conclusions were adequately reflected. Where this was found not to be the case full articles were located and searched. The search results were stored in a Zotero library which at saturation held in excess of 250 records.

Key words and key word combinations were used to narrow the search and cull articles. Initial search terms were wide-ranging including for example 'transnational education', 'transnational higher education' and 'international/intercultural partnership'. Very broad initial themes were identified including for example, big-picture pieces concerning policy at the national and supra-national levels, 'student' focus, 'staff' focus, 'quality' (frameworks and issues). These broad themes were analysed for sub-themes and new search terms emerged for example 'fly-in, fly-out faculty', 'home, host', 'transnational collaborative', 'teaching overseas', 'offshore programmes', 'top-up programme', 'franchise', 'programme articulation', 'joint/double degree', 'direct entrants', 'credit transfer students', 'glocal students'. Successive rounds of literature search were completed on this basis and saturation was determined by a deliberate strategy of exploring 'also looked at'

or 'related articles' cited on the web-page for each article included in the review. Saturation was seen to occur at the point where 'related' and 'also looked at' revealed nothing of relevance that had not already been included in our Zotero library. Throughout successive rounds of literature search emergent themes and sub-themes were refined and the relationship between key themes was synthesised, providing the structure for this paper. What is clear is that whereas the review of the UK literature on internationalisation of HE published in 2007 revealed that there were issues around conflicting policy objectives, conceptualisations of quality, institutional motivations and critical pedagogy in the field of TNHE, assuming a global stance in 2014 suggests that if anything these issues rather than being resolved have become more complex and extensive. Nonetheless, a very positive development is apparent in that the evidence suggests that the field is opening up, research is being conducted and issues at the 'grass roots' are beginning to be aired in the public domain.

## **FINDINGS OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Globalisation, transnational higher education and the problem of definition**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, globalisation, involving the rapid integration of the world economy with increasingly liberalised trade and commerce, the integration of product and factor markets and emerging regional and global markets for skilled labour, is exposing higher education to a veritable explosion in demand, creating forces and tensions that promote changes which are somehow inter-related. New forms of interdependencies are emerging between actors, institutions and states. The education sectors of national economies have long been targeted as areas of regional and global trade. As early as 1999 the OECD valued the global annual trade in higher education at US\$ 3 billion (Calderon and Tangas, 2007). Verger (2009) suggests that since education became one of the 12 service sectors covered by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATS), higher education is the level which has been under most pressure for international liberalisation. Trade in higher education services is represented by the consumption of the higher education services of one country by the nationals of another, for which the latter make payment. In many ways it is quite different from earlier forms of international collaboration. Although not yet on the same scale, it is similar to trade in telecommunications and financial services and many academics view it as representative of the commodification of higher education and the subordination of the values of HE to commercial interests which ignore the contribution of HE to the intellectual, social and cultural development of a society (Bashir, 2007; Hou, Montgomery and McDowell, 2014).

TNHE is one of the most visible manifestations of the globalisation, liberalisation and commodification of HE in a borderless market fuelled by huge increases in the demand for HE worldwide. As noted in the introduction, the number of students studying UK degrees delivered overseas by partner organisations has increased more than ten-fold. Expansion in the form of more committed strategies involving direct investment in branch campuses has undoubtedly taken place but it is dwarfed by expansion based on the less committed strategies involving international partnership at the institutional level.

It may be argued that in effect all transnational education arrangements involve international partnership that crosses cultural boundaries at one level or another from state or government to institution and its staff and students. For example, government agencies tend to be heavily involved in the establishment and running of branch campuses. Other arrangements will of course exist within a framework of government policy, but the partnership itself is more evident at the

level of the institution. Institutional partnerships themselves involve varying degrees of collaboration depending on the nature of the specific arrangement. At one end of the scale joint or double degrees involve two or more institutions with degree awarding powers coming together in an arrangement that leads to a single award made jointly by both or all participants. The dual award involves two or more institutions providing a jointly delivered programme that leads to separate qualifications. Programme articulation enables student progression between two collaborating institutions. A UK institution deems components of a programme provided by an overseas partner as equivalent to components on one or more of its own programmes thereby facilitating direct-entry with advanced standing onto the programmes concerned. A major area of concern here is the transition of students from study in their home institutions to study in the UK. Validation is similar to articulation in that the overseas partner is deemed to have the internal capacity to make awards at a particular level or in a particular disciplinary area, but they lack degree awarding powers. Assessors evaluate individual modules up to the full programme of study developed and delivered by the partner institution and approve it as being of a quality and standard to justify an award from their university. In this case students study exclusively in their home country, but in effect the programme they study is owned by the partner institution (Baskerville, 2013).

Clearly the arrangements discussed so far may involve substantial collaboration at the level of the institution but as far as institutional educators are concerned the degree of collaboration may be relatively limited since, in each case, a significant degree of autonomy exists within the partnership at the programme level. Franchising is quite different since rather than involving the mixing of components developed and delivered at two or more collaborating institutions it involves the licensing of intellectual property appropriate for institutions abroad that lack degree-awarding powers and/or sufficient expertise for programme development. Sometimes these programmes are delivered exclusively by staff of the host institution but more frequently delivery is supported by 'fly-in, fly-out' faculty based at the home institution. In such an environment home institutions tend to be mindful of both their legal liability and/or the possibility of damage to their reputation. Paradoxically then franchising, whilst being a less-committed strategy of transnational higher education in financial terms (since direct investment is relatively limited), can become a high risk venture if partnerships are not nurtured in such a way that builds sustainable relationships of trust based on shared meanings, motivations and commitment. Thus in franchising arrangements the transactional positionality of actors at the level of the institution and in the classroom becomes a major determining factor in the success or otherwise of the educational partnership (Baskerville, 2013; Heffernan, 2004; Heffernan and Poole, 2005; 2004.)

Understanding the global expansion of contemporary TNHE tends to be hampered by the complexity of the varied range of possible arrangements discussed above, despite the activities of organisations like the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (OBHE) and the UK HE International Unit (IU) which explore the full range of international HE activities at institutional and government levels and produce statistics which attempt to analyse trends within the context of policy frameworks (Knight 2006; Naidoo 2009). This state of affairs also reflects a fundamental difference in views at the national level as to which modes of delivery are considered TNHE. For example, Australia differentiates between distance learning and TNHE whereas the British Council definition includes distance learning as a TNHE delivery mode. For DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) transnational higher education involves German universities exercising a substantial degree of academic responsibility over the programme, therefore joint degree programmes are not included. While statistical agencies like HESA in the UK tend to prescribe how

data is recorded at institutions in order to provide a common accounting regime at the national level, the fields used are often not held by one person or in one place in an HEI. Clearly there are issues around definition, data collection and reporting and as TNHE becomes a highly significant part of the work of universities there is an increasing imperative for common recording practices and common categorisations (Drew et al. 2008). However, this alone is unlikely to significantly enhance understanding in an environment where senders define the phenomenon rather than developing definitions in collaboration with the recipients of TNHE (British Council, 2013).

### **Globalisation, international mobility and academic capital**

The literature on international academic mobility suggests that while academics are developing their transnational identity capital, mobility in a globalised world tends to be shaped by the forces of neoliberal policy and market-framed research competition. Kim (2009; 2010) in referring to transnational academics as new 'strangers' in the university (2009: 401) argues that 'the contemporary globalization of academic mobility [which] has been a part of neoliberal free market movement' (2009: 399) is engendering a process of 'brain transfer and transformation' in a globalised space which is devoid of any notion of 'interculturality'. In contrast to the neo-liberal approach to transnational encounters in HE which is instrumentalist in providing training programmes based on codified knowledge for the development of intercultural competence skills, interculturality draws on embodied, encultured knowledge where the response to the experience of another culture is met with open-mindedness, interest and curiosity within a reflexive mind-set which prompts the questioning of one's own way of life and surroundings and ultimately leads to cultural enrichment (Kim, 2009; 2010).

Both the staff and students of universities are driven increasingly to cross borders by global employers who value experience gained from international mobility in the context of the globalisation of business and commerce and the convergence of national and regional professional landscapes, a process which proceeds at a variable pace in response to global trends and issues such as migration and environmental change. The pace of change has been relatively rapid in for example, the fields of business and management which have long held an outward orientation since trade and commercial activities are an inherent part of globalisation. Journalism on the other hand, continues to be locked into national ways of thinking despite the forces of globalisation. The literature suggests that in recent years universal discourses of the globalised knowledge-based economy and learning society characterised by mode 2 knowledge production (Van Lente and Hassels 2010) have prompted international collaborative education programmes and transnational networks of universities, employers and other organisations in fields as diverse as health and social care, environmental education and flood risk management, various branches of engineering and education and inter-professional, multidisciplinary fields like health informatics (Chan 2011; Evers and Nyberg, 2013; Grieves, 2010; Sochan, 2008).

Simultaneously in an age of digital Taylorism and routinisation in the workplace where fewer jobs require the critical skills of graduates, the 'top ten' leading universities in every country are increasingly forced to engage in a war for talent for financial survival, vigorously competing with each other to attract the 'A players' from the global talent pool (Lauder 2011). Here the influence of universal marketisation discourses of international competition, branding, increasing market share is apparent. In the face of the transnationalisation of academic capital and increasing collaboration between transnational corporations and research universities the traditional role of universities as promoters of national economic competitiveness may be challenged by the institutional drivers of commercialisation and financial gain (Kauppinen 2012). However, others hold that both the less committed partnership and more committed direct investment strategies



of TNHE are not simply about institutional commercialisation and financial gain, an argument which is further explored in the next section (Healey 2008; 2013).

While it seems clear that universal discourses of marketisation and the knowledge-based economy and learning society may have conflicting influences in transnational higher education, some authors maintain that visions of the future of HE in a globalised world based on knowledge per se are in themselves expressions of neoliberal ideology. The notion of 'eduscapes' is seen to provide a less ideological and more apt analytic for the analysis of the globalisation of HE which challenges current globalisation master-discourse (Djerasimovic 2014). Globalisation as a geo-spatial process connects geographically distant actors allowing global flows of people, ideas and educational activities to intertwine with local action in the form of 'eduscapes' involving globally networked environments built upon close and equal transnational partnerships which allow students, educators and other actors to build mutual understanding. (Begin-Caouette, 2013; Forstrop 2013). Ironically, quality assurance has traditionally been portrayed as an area of conflict in the literature but evidence now suggests that it can provide a platform, within the context of 'eduscapes', for mutual trust and co-operation which can instil confidence in mutual decision making processes. The International Network for QA Agencies in HE has been cited as playing an important part in developing this collective effort (Cheung 2006). The 'tropED' Network for International Health in HE' which has developed its own transnational QA framework also provides a good example of how participatory learning processes within collaborative QA environments can provide a positive stimulus to relationships between transnational partners (Zwanniken et al. 2013). Thus quality assurance can be a basis for true collaboration as opposed to representing erosion of national educational sovereignty.

In effect, participatory learning in the context of 'eduscapes' can challenge the influence of transnational elites who occupy powerful positions in space and time, exert control over networked relationships developed within the context of the neoliberal, market-orientated discourse. Eduscapes enhance the positionality of local agents who seek to resist the commodification of higher education and the subordination of the values of HE to commercial interests. They also provide a platform for those who acknowledge the importance of building mutual understanding within partnerships which prioritise HE's contribution to the intellectual, social and cultural development of society.

### **Policy responses to global realities: divergence, convergence and emergence?**

From the literature it is clear that the issue of how governments and institutions respond to the new global realities of trade liberalisation and attendant international competition and the demands of the global knowledge economy, is high on the policy agenda. Moutsios (2009) argues that international organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, OECD and World Trade Organisation play an enhanced role in producing educational policies and that decisions affecting higher education are taken within a framework of economic competition (Moutsios, 2009). In addition to this, policy makers in transnational networks face dilemmas in responding to the sometimes conflicting globalising governance models and evolving national policy aspirations. To use the UK as an example, Elliott (1997) was one of the first in the field to argue that UK policy emphasising HE as a tradable activity generating foreign currency from the recruitment of international students and 'e-University' initiatives, rather than addressing any genuine educational needs, differentiated the UK significantly from many of its international counterparts in policy terms.

In more recent years government policy documents like *'International Education-Global Growth and Prosperity'* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013) suggest a continuing emphasis on the export of education:

International education, in all its forms, represents a huge opportunity for Britain. BIS estimates that in 2011 education exports were worth £17.5bn to the UK economy. This strategy analyses the economic opportunities resulting from this growth, and sets out a targeted plan for the UK to grasp them, building on our education strengths both at home and abroad (BIS 2013: 5).

Yet the policy discourse has shifted to encompass more than simply financial gain:

International students in the UK bring diversity to the education sector, helping to provide an international dimension that benefits all students. Engagement in international education, both in the UK and via TNE, enhances the reputation and brand recognition of UK institutions and helps project the UK's soft power (BIS 2013: 23).

'Soft power' is a term first coined by Joseph Nye of Harvard University in his book, *'Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power'*. For Nye, power is the ability to influence the behaviour of others to get the outcomes you want. There are several ways one can achieve this; you can coerce them with threats; you can induce them with payments or you can attract and co-opt them to want what you want (Nye 1990).

A country may obtain the outcomes it wants ...because other countries – admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness – want to follow it...This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them (Nye 2004).

On the face of it then, the export of UK education is now driven by more than simply contribution to the balance of payments and it is deemed a cultural, political and foreign policy instrument of influence. The extension of 'soft power' may foster a process of integration and assimilation in global HE contexts. However, the terms divergence, convergence and emergence have been coined by Frankowicz et al. (2008) and applied to the context of the Polish HE arena to exemplify the way that national policy is converging but then emerging transformed. Another interesting example is the Bologna process where transnational communication of this process can induce change even in countries not participating in the harmonisation of study structures, quality assurance measures or benchmarking activities (Vogtle and Martens, 2014; Vogtle et al. 2011).

When viewed through the lens of positionality the shifting contours of the landscape of TNHE become readily apparent. Globalisation may well have resulted in the initial spread of 'Western' institutions across the globe but this very trend itself can produce a pressure for local autonomy and identity. In TNHE, the evidence suggests that rather than supplanting diversity, integration is slowly being reconfigured as heterogeneity re-asserts itself in the local context. In effect globalisation processes are bringing different cultures into 'contact and collision' and undermining privileged 'Western' views of the world. Rather than resulting in a global narrative, globalisation perhaps foregrounds the very impossibility of such a narrative (Edwards and Usher 2006) International consortia of universities are arising from global co-operation and competition and consistent with the concept of 'eduscapes' discussed above these may well have the potential to

develop as deliberate spaces where internationalisation agendas and TNHE can be re-framed (Tadaki and Tremewan 2013).

### **Policy perspectives of 'other' in Transnational Higher Education: the notion of capacity building**

The discussion so far suggests that unlike more traditional internationalisation activities TNHE represents the direct impact of trade liberalisation and a more commercial approach in which higher education systems have become sites for competition and contestation of various kinds in various societies. The dilemma posed by the potential conflict of simultaneously responding to the needs of the globalised labour market, industry and the global system of higher education, focused on the future trajectory of the 'A players' alluded to above, whilst seeking to improve access to higher education for historically excluded social, ethnic and racial groups is common the world over, but it is perhaps particularly stark in the developing world (Lee 2012, Srinivaso 2007 and Yang 2006). While organisations like the British Council are actively working to assess the impact of UK-provided transnational education on host countries in terms of academic, economic, human resource development, socio-cultural and status outcomes, attempts to develop an analytical framework to establish which countries have the most favourable environment for transnational education suggest an abiding preoccupation with neo-liberal market responses to globalisation (British Council, 2013).

Despite the influence of the neo-liberal discourse there is a prominent theme in the literature around capacity building, an approach to development that identifies the obstacles to the realisation of development goals and focuses on the restructuring of organisations through partnering arrangements which facilitate creative solutions to development challenges and a process of continual change and adaptation as new challenges emerge. In the context of higher education capacity-building involves transnational cooperation and multilateral partnerships, primarily between higher education institutions. According to the National Erasmus Office at the micro level capacity building aims to modernise and reform HEIs through activities such as developing new curricula or improving existing ones, improving governance and management systems and building relationships between higher education institutions and relevant socio-economic actors. At the macro level capacity building targets national higher education systems and policies with the aims of modernising the policies, governance and management of higher education systems and strengthening relations between higher education systems and the wider socio-economic environment (National Erasmus Office). Van Deuren (2013) maintains that capacity building is about supplying education to greater numbers of students, serving a more diversified student body, increasing the relevance of education to the labour market and enhancing both autonomy and accountability in an environment characterised by larger and more diversified institutions (Van Deuren, 2013).

The strongest players in this field are the South-East Asian countries of China, Singapore and Malaysia. This is perhaps unsurprising given their prominent positions in the global economy. The Chinese economy which was distinctly frail up to the late 1970s is now the world's second largest economy to the US in both nominal GDP and purchasing power parity. It is the world's fastest growing economy with growth rates averaging 10% over the past 30 years. China also plays a vital role in international trade. Singapore is a major commercial hub, boasting the fourth biggest financial centre and one of the top five busiest ports in the global economy. 75% of the population of Singapore are Chinese. Singapore enjoys the third highest per capita income in the world but also suffers one of the world's highest levels of income inequality. Malaysia is the third largest economy in South-East Asia again registering a highly respectable record of economic growth

averaging 6.5% over a period of some 50 years. Clearly economic ascendancy influences positionality of these nation states in comparison with their immediate neighbours and with Western states responding to the opportunity to earn foreign currency from exporting HE programmes in the face of domestic shortfalls. Singapore and Malaysia are also well placed as 'host' nations since their system of government derives from the Westminster model, a factor which will enhance positionality in relation to the UK, a lead actor on the TNHE stage (The Singapore Government website:

<http://www.gov.sg/government/web/content/govsg/classic/home> Official Portal of the Government of Malaysia: <https://www.malaysia.gov.my/en> The Federation of International Trade Associations website: <http://fita.org/index.html> (see individual country profiles)

China, Singapore and Malaysia have imported TNHE in the past in order to increase enrolments and quicken the pace of massifying higher education but they are also promoting wider access and more inclusion despite the potential conflict with aspirations to enhance the competitiveness and quality of higher education (Huang 2006a). In China the drivers to engage with TNHE have related to domestic socio-economic development where rapid economic growth has increased incomes whilst at the same time posing challenges to both social and environmental stability. The system has been expanded primarily to satisfy increasing demand for higher education from a burgeoning middle-class. However, in the process institutions have also gradually learnt about new missions, curriculum and faculty development and become interested in new teaching ideas which they believe may improve academic standards and social prestige. Again there are complexities and tensions in this with both teaching and academic standards being highly regulated and the overriding emphasis being on maintaining sovereignty and independence of decision making rather than collaboration and integration (Huang 2006b).

China's education imports increased dramatically during the early 2000s and much of the literature around that time described government policy. However, in more recent years there have been more studies concerning impact on national HE systems (Huang 2011; Huang 2006). Chinese scholars acknowledge the need for structural reform in university governance with Ong and Chan (2012) arguing it is desirable to empower the non-public sector and separate the role of the Party from academic administration. This may seem self-evident in other countries but is perceived as a major step for China and throughout the literature relating to change in Chinese higher education, the influence of international structure and agency is apparent, through a complex process of policy borrowing, which is transforming the mode of governance in Chinese higher education (Yang 2010).

In Malaysia there has been a proliferation of 'degree mills' and TNHE has been difficult to regulate. The increase in private tertiary education providers in Malaysia and also in Singapore have been subject to a large number of different requirements based on sometimes inconsistent standards leading to counterproductive and ineffective outcomes like the diversion of resources (Lim 2010). International branch campuses of reputable foreign universities enhance Malaysia's image as a regional hub for education and as a result Malaysia has introduced regulations to facilitate the operation and relocation of TNHE providers (Morshidi 2006).

Reforms of universities particularly within South-East Asia in the past two decades have been characterised as Anglo-Saxonisation as they have followed a similar path to Australia, the UK and the USA by introducing market-orientated reform measures for de-regulation and accountability and the massification of HE despite limited national budgets and the unpredictability of increasingly globalising societies (Tsuruta, 2006). An apparent incongruence has also emerged

between liberalisation and the drive to maintain national character and identity in education and to exercise robust quality assurance monitoring on imported foreign education activities (Huang 2006b). Transformationalists argue that in a world of de-regulation and liberalisation national governments are not relinquishing power of decision making or sovereignty, instead power and sovereignty are being shared among many other public and private agencies in a multi-layered system of governance (Tsuruta, 2006). At the end of the day experience in South-East Asia may reflect Lee's (2006) proposition that the path of TNHE development may be initially challenging but in the longer term opportunities will be created.

Viewed through the lens of 'positionality' it is clear that from the economic stand-point China, Malaysia and Singapore are relatively well placed to reap the advantages of TNHE in the longer term. These countries have aspirations to develop HE infrastructure assuming the status of 'sending' rather than 'receiving' countries. Indeed, a key driver of Malaysian policy is the desire to become a regional hub for higher education. In a sense economic ascendancy has significantly influenced positionality in the TNHE arena. It may be argued that local understandings, norms and practices in what were once marginally positioned places have been replaced by the shared norms of competitiveness and sound governance which have diffused in from more powerful places. So China, Singapore and Malaysia have to a degree come to share a common positionality in a globalisation discourse which resonates with national elites, whose interests are supported by neo-liberal open-border policies and whose advisers studied in the academic institutions of the core countries.

The TNHE experience of the African continent stands in stark relief to that of South East Asia. Africa is distinctly under-represented in the literature and it is argued that this reflects not only a paucity of resources which has created tensions and posed challenges in facilitating the contribution of higher education to development, but also reflects positionality in both the spatial and economic sense (Johnson et al 2011). Obamba's (2013) work cites the growing convergence of the knowledge and partnership paradigms in contemporary development discourses which has transformed HE into a critical stakeholder in promoting development in Africa. There have also been some good examples of capacity building in Africa such as the Medical Education Partnership Initiative, which funds 13 African Medical Schools with one US university acting in a co-ordinating role (Mullan et al. 2012). It might be the case that given Africa's overwhelming need for capacity building in health this review in concentrating on HE journals has failed to reveal research published in health journals. However, it is argued that notwithstanding this, examples of HE partnership to address development goals are too few and far between. The positionality of two places is measured not only by physical distance but also by nature and intensity of the interconnectedness between them. It is argued that in the African context positionality is not being reshaped by the reduction of separation between distant places which emerges from strong interconnectedness. Rather the weak links that connect the disadvantaged with the advantaged are reinforcing existing inequalities to the degree that equality even at the level of discourse is not being achieved (Sheppard 2002).

### **Students in the transnational teaching and learning context**

Students studying in TNHE are increasingly referred to as 'glocal' and these students have particular and distinctive needs in having global educational aspirations but also constraints which tie them to their localities. Essentially glocals will pay for a global learning experience while staying in their home country or region. Addressing the needs and aspirations of glocal students is complicated by the changing institutional, demographic, economic and political landscape of TNHE and it has been argued that an innovative and strategic approach to engaging with

internationalisation in Asia is required that moves beyond mere considerations of student recruitment. For example the insistence of glocals that they want to be taught by 'Western' educators is presented by Chowdhury and Phan (2014) as complicity in postcolonial positions. In essence, foreign institutions need to understand glocals and strategically engage with them (Choudaha 2012). Choudaha, 2013 citing Porter, notes that 'Competitive strategy is about being different ... deliberately choosing to perform activities differently or to perform different activities ... to deliver a unique mix of value' and goes on to conclude 'Winning the glocal students requires a deeper comprehension of their changing needs and identification of the best fit delivery models' (Choudaha 2013 <http://www.international.ac.uk/newsletters/archive-international-focus/international-focus-95/transnational-education-competing-to-win-glocal-students.aspx> ). This is a key message for both institutions and practitioners engaging in TNHE. Despite this, research shows that students in TNHE often find course content insufficiently adaptive to their local experience and background and therefore failing to give real life guidance (Yang, 2006). Programmes in Hong Kong are accused of providing a cocktail curriculum in Western-style pedagogy with only some reflection of the local environment and integration of characteristics of globalisation (Yang 2006).

Whilst TNHE in Hong Kong for example, may be more robust due to its longer established nature, research shows that although students gain in terms of their confidence in expressing opinions in different situations, some Western teachers have insufficient understanding of local society and culture and what knowledge they have is usually second-hand, inaccurate and out of date (Yang 2006). Study of learning support for offshore students underlines the importance of person to person contact, embedding learning resources into course delivery and interventions to assist students and acknowledge cultural factors. The need for academic staff to engage in planning, professional development and attitudinal change is seen to be crucial (Hussin 2007).

The literature suggests that there are significant issues regarding the student learning experience in TNHE contexts, issues concerning curricula, pedagogy and student support, which need to be researched in collaborative cross-cultural contexts. However, of perhaps greater concern are the outcomes of TNHE for the future career and social trajectories of glocal students. Evidence suggests that as higher education expands in South East Asia, graduate employability is becoming increasingly dependent upon the ability to maintain positional advantage in the labour market. A process of credit inflation is said to be devaluing the degrees of those who have studied overseas and TNHE is exacerbating the situation by reproducing local patterns of disadvantage. While TNHE can partially offset a shortfall in domestic university places, glocal students often find that their degree is valued less than the home equivalent. Furthermore, the vast majority of TNHE programmes involve no travel whatsoever and disadvantage is reinforced by the relationship between this (im)mobility and the accumulation of social and cultural capital. In effect then TNHE may be indirectly perpetuating class inequalities and promoting an elite class of transnational professionals or overseas educated locals bound by a sense of common identity and mutual recognition despite the rhetoric of massification (Waters 2009, 2007; Waters and Leung, 2013; 2012).

### **Cultures of TNHE: programmes, staff and institutions**

In many professions understanding peoples' backgrounds is paramount and therefore local society and culture is important but some students in non-Western countries want to engage with Western knowledge and pedagogies and find adaptation condescending, a kind of reverse colonialism. Consequently TNHE providers impact on individual learners, institutions and wider society, educationally and culturally and may contribute to a global shaping of identities towards

Western values. In addition to this there are cultural differences in learning so there is a need to adapt the Western genre of pedagogy without imposing cultural and pedagogical imperialism. While recognising and accommodating cultural differences is essential to success of TNHE courses, providers may focus on just providing a marketable product at the expense of academic standards (Yang 2006). Some TNHE courses in Hong Kong for example, are almost entirely based on Western experience; ironically as mentioned above this can be a selling point (Chowdhury and Phan, 2014).

However, teachers and students are constrained by their cultural environment and cultural identity and engaging in university learning might seem easier when the teacher from one country teaches at home to students who also originate there and share the teacher's values. Experience of learning may become more challenging when teaching involves delivering programmes developed in one culture to recipients of another because different values, beliefs and assumptions are likely to come into conflict (Yang 2006). The way to transformation and change is through pedagogy and thus attention to feedback, feed-forward and feed-across the knowledge transfer processes will result in shared personal learning and increased institutionalisation of acquired knowledge (Walton and Guarisco 2007).

Thus in TNHE contexts it is clear that teachers need to adapt personally and pedagogically through a process of intercultural learning and there is a need to acknowledge cultural distance rather than adopting a universalist mind-set to develop intercultural competence. Transnational educators must be prepared to learn from ambiguity, developing capacity to experience personal growth which will add to universities' human capital. (Hoare 2013; Keevers et al 2014).

Transnational teaching experience is a developmental opportunity that can enhance teaching offshore and at home (Keay et al 2014). Novel experiences in TNHE contexts can encourage teachers to reflect on the purposes of learning, the process of learning and the content of learning which can enhance teaching practice generally (Smith 2009). Experiences of flying faculty can stimulate transformations in professional development, lives and identity, but there are issues about how universities and the academic development community specifically support staff for globalised roles (Smith 2013). It is clear from the literature that there is a need for more research around relationships and culture building to generate value creating and sustainable models of TNHE (Bolton and Nie 2010).

Exploring narratives of failure constructed within a private foreign college in China, Pullman (2013) developed ethnographic accounts of students and teachers to suggest how racialisation is enacted through accounts of failure. It acts as a form of justification for concerns of both parties and shows how processes of racialisation are tied to the very structure of TNHE and the standardised and globalised curriculum has unintended local effects (Pullman 2013). In feminist theory positionality describes situated positions from which teachers come to know the world. In this sense objective and universal knowledge is a myth since all teachers have a social situatedness in terms of gender, race, class and other axes of social difference which in the field of TNHE becomes more complex with the interrelatedness arising from the need to negotiate cultural boundaries particularly in contexts of relative academic freedom and influence within organisational settings. Nonetheless positionality is a relational construct and the conditions of possibility for an agent depend on his or her position with respect to others. Positionality is continually enacted in ways that can both reproduce and challenge its pre-existing configurations. It is argued that in the past enactments have tended to reproduce positional inequalities but the literature suggests that in recent years there are moves – albeit limited - towards acknowledging such inequality, recognising that positionalities are complexly tied to situation, meaning and interplay of social locations. In this

sense adopting approaches to practice which problematise one's own positionality may well change relative positions in the longer term (Sheppard 2002; Edwards and Usher 2006; Edwards, Crosling and Lim, 2013).

## Conclusions

The structure of this paper itself reflects a striking trend in the literature, that is, an abiding pre-occupation with issues of policy, governance and regulation alongside a paucity of research exploring curricula, pedagogy and student support mechanisms. This scenario may reflect genuine and pressing concerns in the former arenas but it may also be symptomatic of a highly sensitive cross-cultural debate in which the voices of teachers and students remain relatively marginalised and inaudible given the positionality of actors on the TNHE stage. Similarly, on the face of it the review may seem to focus on TNHE in some countries to the neglect of others. However, this is not the case, rather the review reflects research in the field which is skewed towards those countries where opportunities are perceived to exist, where there is much activity going on in what home institutions see as the most favourable environment and where there exists a level of maturity in existing collaborative relationships (British Council, 2013).

This exploration of the TNHE landscape through the lens of positionality shows how TNHE is in many ways a distinctive field within the internationalisation agenda and qualitatively different from research focusing on international student recruitment, study abroad, internationalisation at home and an internationalised curriculum because of the prominence of the partnership itself in determining relative success or failure. Competing in the TNHE marketplace institutions invest tremendous resource over an extended period of time to agree arrangements which are acceptable to both 'home' and 'host', 'sender' and 'receiver'. Yet these partnerships tend to be rightly perceived as fragile entities involving high-risk; this is particularly so in the case of franchise arrangements. This paper therefore argues that in terms of positionality the relationship between academics and their institutions shifts in the TNHE context and the institution becomes a much more significant player in determining the way forward. In this way, academics' autonomy may effectively be reduced in order to avoid the perceived consequences of opening up a sensitive, cross-cultural and positionally complex debate which is likely to emerge from collaborative practitioner research.

TNHE may challenge some of the accepted views of international education in geographical and cultural terms. It magnifies the issues that have been familiar in international education over the last two decades and because of this may be able to provide a lens through which to see significant issues of internationalisation more broadly. The lens of positionality serves to underline the importance in TNHE of avoiding polarised strategic stances such as the dichotomy of global integration versus local responsiveness. It highlights the significance of a process of convergence at supra- and national levels of policy formulation which may well derive from equal positionality among an elite group of transnational actors who have a strong sense of common identity and mutual understanding within the context of globalising discourse. It also begs the question of just how transnational TNHE is in addressing the needs of the disadvantaged in our global society in light of the fact that only those countries where perceived 'opportunities' (British Council, 2013) exist have been actively courted to take their place at the TNHE discussion table, while African and South American countries seem to have to wait for a vacant seat despite the urgency of their development needs.



At the 'grass roots' of learning and teaching across cultural boundaries transactional positionality becomes a complex issue in the context of the intimate inter-relationship between individuals who possess widely divergent life experiences, identities, values and beliefs. The issues on the ground, although under-researched at this time, are apparent for both teachers and students. Not only discussions which exist around curriculum and pedagogy, but also those around access to HE and graduate employability and the marginalising tendencies of TNHE, suggest an overwhelming need to explore and come to greater understanding of teaching and learning practices, processes and aspirations in TNHE contexts.

A central argument of this paper is that the literature generally suggests that educationalists and students alike have yet to find their voice. In terms of their positionality in the maelstrom of TNHE what voice there is, exists on the margins. Yet they have much to contribute to debates beyond the chalk-face, at institutional, national and supra-national levels. In exploring the wider TNHE landscape through the lens of positionality it is hoped that this paper may go some way towards building the mutual knowledge, understanding and confidence within intercultural HE partnerships that will empower students and teachers to make their legitimate contribution to a process of TNHE which reduces the disparities in positionality among people and the places in which they live.

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